

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE A-1,8

THE WASHINGTON STAR (GREEN LINE)
15 September 1978

Loss of Satellite Secrets By U.S. May Obstruct Arms Treaty Approval

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Special to The Washington Star

The loss of a top-secret document allegedly passed to the Soviet Union by a former CIA employee is emerging as a major, unexpected obstacle to prospects for ratification of a new strategic arms limitation accord.

Within recent days officials on the Senate intelligence committee which is investigating the case, as are intelligence and Pentagon officials, have made it plain that the loss of the secret reports to the Soviet Union has dealt U.S. security "irreparable harm" and compromises a key program that would verify Soviet compliance with SALT limitations.

The loss of the document, officials say, effectively compromises the highly important "Big Bird" satellite surveillance system that takes pictures of Soviet missile silos, naval installations, airfields and troop movements.

"IT'S A SYSTEM that provides a significant fraction of the information that we gather, things that we judge by seeing," said one official. "It's a terribly important system."

He added: "The assumption is our collection capability is compromised. The Soviets can take measures to limit the effectiveness of that collection system, and in doing so limit the amount of our verification."

Although intelligence officials are reluctant to discuss the case, information about it has been circulating in the Senate, which must eventually approve a new SALT accord. Several officials said privately that the security breach — which makes verification more difficult and virtually instructs the Soviet Union how to improve their camouflage techniques — will pose an unexpected snag in the Senate.

The case itself has deeply embarrassed the CIA, whose director, Stansfield Turner, testified about it yesterday before the Senate Intelligence Committee.

THE CASE INVOLVED the arrest and indictment last month of a 23-year-old former CIA employee, William P. Kampiles of Chicago.

According to a complaint filed by the FBI in a federal court in Chicago, Kampiles stole the manual outlining the secret electronic surveillance system at a time he was employed as a low-level CIA worker. He allegedly sold it later to an agent at the Soviet Embassy in Athens, code named "Michael," for \$3,000.

Law enforcement officials have indicated that the CIA had no idea that the manual — describing the workings of the "Big Bird" satellite — was missing for months, possibly as long as a year, until Kampiles wrote to a friend in the CIA saying he had made contact with Soviet agents in Greece. According to one account, Kampiles suggested he might now be of help to the CIA.

It was not until after the FBI had questioned Kampiles and gone back to the agency to ask about the manual, one source has said, that the CIA realized it was missing.

THE "BIG BIRD" satellites are believed so sophisticated that they can distinguish between civilians and military people and pick out the makes of automobiles.

One source said the Senate Intelligence Committee — during a closed hearing on a recent coup in Afghanistan — viewed photographs of soldiers in tanks, taken from the satellite, and were able to detect whether the troops had shaved.

The photographic reconnaissance satellite — which is believed to weigh 12 tons — is also known as KH-11 or Keyhole 11. Details about the satellite were contained in a top-secret, 85-page technical manual that Kampiles allegedly removed from a file cabinet.

What appears to worry intelligence officials is not that the Soviets will build a similar satellite but, because they now can understand how it works, they can effectively combat it.

BECAUSE A SALT agreement is designed to limit arms — and is subject to verification by both sides — the security breach places the verification process in some doubt, said intelligence sources.

One official said that there was "real substance . . . genuine substance" to the concern in the Senate and elsewhere about the impact of the security breach on a SALT agreement. Compounding the problem, officials say, is the fact that the system was apparently far more advanced than anything comparable in the Soviet technical arsenal.

The Senate intelligence panel is believed to be preparing a report on the security breach and its possible implications in terms of SALT for the Senate.

The CIA also is conducting an investigation to determine how a relatively junior official had access to the highly sensitive document and how the loss of the document went undetected for almost a year.